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# University prep-school EFL learners' dictionary ownership and preferences

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## Abstract

Dictionaries, regarded as lexicographical reference books, are considered as indispensable learning tools in foreign language acquisition. It seems that the recent advances in IT change and shape EFL learners' dictionary ownership and preferences. Research on EFL learners' dictionary ownership and preferences has been increasing in abroad EFL contexts to explore this new situation especially over the past decade. Such research mainly result that paper dictionaries are losing popularity and that electronic dictionaries are gaining importance among EFL learners (e.g. Jian et al., 2009 and Kobayashi, 2008). This rather recent situation surely has pedagogical and curricular applications. However, research on EFL learners' dictionary ownership and preferences in Turkey is very rare, almost non-existent, especially over the last decade. Therefore, the primary aim of this study is to investigate university prep-school EFL learners' dictionary ownership and preferences. With this aim this paper reports on a descriptive study, about dictionary ownership and preferences of 157 university prep-school EFL learners. A modified Turkish version of the questionnaires based on Dashtestani's (2013) and Hasan's (2013) research was adopted and used in this study. The data were analyzed descriptively and the results were provided in tables. The results demonstrate that university prep-school EFL learners strongly believe that an EFL learner needs a dictionary but they also mostly report that they have not been informed about how to use dictionaries. The results also demonstrate that; most of the participants own bilingual paper dictionaries and use their cell phones as bilingual dictionaries but that only a few own pocket electronic dictionaries; and that they use their cell phones as dictionaries more frequently. The study concludes with the main suggestion that EFL learners should explicitly be informed about how to use paper dictionaries effectively in general and especially about how to use IT (cell phone/computer/CD/online) dictionaries.

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Keywords: English as a foreign language, university prep-school, dictionary ownership, dictionary preferences

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## 1. Introduction

“Dictionary (n)” is described as; a book that lists the words of a language in alphabetical order and gives their meaning, or that gives the equivalent words in a different language (The New Oxford Dictionary of English, 1998). The dictionary is a reliable resource for all types of lexical information that learners may look up (Ezza&Saadeh, 2011). Therefore, it is generally believed that everyone learning a foreign language should have a dictionary. Brumfit (1985) describes dictionaries as the most widespread single language improvement device ever invented, but yet we need greater understanding of the dictionary and the dictionary is probably the most taken for granted.

In fact, dictionaries are considered as indispensable learning tools in foreign language acquisition and are often seen as a basic tool in the process of foreign language learning. Moreover, its use is supposed to be familiar to all, the process of its use commonly understood. Its skills are so elementary that, in many people’s mind, the training of them only belongs in the primary education curriculum. According to Tseng (2009), dictionaries are considered faithful companions to language learners, especially to second and foreign language learners because they provide a quick and direct access to the meaning of an unknown word. In fact, the supporting role of dictionaries has been emphasized by both teachers and researchers. Nowadays with the easy and wide spread access to the Internet, more and more EFL students use online dictionaries when they encounter unknown words in their learning tasks. It is mainly because online dictionaries like electronic ones can provide students the information about the looked – up words easily and quickly.

However, research on dictionary ownership, preference, attitudes and effects is not equally stressed and given importance in EFL contexts. In other words, there is generally a lack of research about dictionaries. Despite the importance of dictionaries for EFL learners, research on dictionary has started to capture the deserved attention of language educators only in the last decade. Unfortunately, research on dictionaries in Turkish EFL contexts is almost non-existent and we know very little or almost nothing about the behavior and preferences of EFL learners toward the dictionary. This situation may have many drawbacks for students, teachers, researchers and educators in that, appropriate and significant pedagogical applications may be out of place since dictionary use has not been researched in Turkish EFL contexts.

Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to explore university prep-school EFL learners’ dictionary ownership and preferences in the Turkish context. More specifically, the present study addresses the following research questions:

What are the dictionary ownership and preferences of university prep-school EFL learners as regards to:

1. Background in dictionary usage?
2. Kind of dictionary owned?
3. Kind of dictionary used and usage frequency?
4. Thoughts about kinds of dictionaries?

The current study will shed light on an area of research in foreign language learning addressed by linguists worldwide, but neglected in Turkish EFL settings. The study findings will help to;

- explore prep-school EFL learners’ background about dictionaries enrolled in a Turkish university,
- determine kinds of dictionaries owned, used and usage frequency,
- explore prep-school EFL learners’ thoughts about kinds of dictionaries.

## 2. Literature Review

Evaluated overall, as argued by Hamouda (2013) research on dictionaries show: that most L2 learners, including advance learners, depend on dictionaries; that L2 learners most frequently use dictionaries for lexical meaning; that L2 learners primarily use dictionaries for written tasks; that L2 learners use bilingual dictionaries more widely than monolingual dictionaries; that high proficiency learners use monolingual dictionaries more extensively than lower proficiency learners , although all learners continue to use bilingual dictionaries; that L2 learners prefer to use e-

dictionaries (electronic pocket dictionaries/PC based dictionaries/online dictionaries) more frequently than printed dictionaries, especially over the last decade; and that most L2 learners are not skilled enough in using dictionaries to make the maximum use of dictionaries and that they need explicit instruction about using dictionaries.

Tomaszczyk (1979) was one of the first researchers to investigate the dictionary requirements of non-native speakers of English. His results illustrated that: participants feel greater satisfaction with monolingual dictionaries but the majority prefers to use bilingual dictionaries; and that most learners (85%) use the dictionary to find lexical meaning. A more frequently cited study of non-native speakers dictionary needs is that conducted by Bejoint (1981). 122 French students of English at the University of Lyon participated in his study. Findings revealed that 96% of the students possessed a monolingual dictionary. A similar survey was carried out by Battenburg (1991). The survey revealed that bilingual dictionaries were owned by the largest number of subjects, and native-speaker dictionaries by the smallest number. In general there was a correlation between dictionary use and ownership. At more advanced levels, bilingual and monolingual learners' dictionaries decreased, and native speaker dictionary use increased.

Hamouda's (2013) research on dictionary use by Saudi EFL students also revealed that; the English-Arabic bilingual dictionary was seen as the most useful and most frequently used type of dictionary. A high percentage (91,9%) preferred bilingual dictionaries to other types. Ryu's (2006) study also revealed that students favored bilingual dictionaries over monolingual dictionaries to find out the meaning of words. Likewise, Ali's (2012) study about monolingual dictionary use in an EFL context also revealed that a considerable number of the students do not like to use monolingual dictionaries. In fact Nation's (2003) study on learning vocabulary explains why L2 learners prefer bilingual dictionaries. This study has shown that for students to use a monolingual dictionary easily they need to know at least 2000 words in English. Students do not achieve this until after 5-6 years of language study. Therefore research on dictionaries mostly shows that learners prefer bilingual dictionaries.

Recent research also shows that the majority of L2 learners prefer to use electronic dictionaries (pocket electronic dictionaries/online or internet based dictionaries/dictionaries on CD-ROMs) rather than paper dictionaries. Bower and McMillan's (2006) study, for example, revealed that 96% of the students owned electronic dictionaries and 90% of them were very active electronic dictionary users on reading and writing tasks (writing 53% and reading 37%). There has been a growing interest in the use of electronic dictionaries for learning foreign languages. Accordingly, there has been a rise in students' use of electronic dictionaries for EFL purposes. Several studies have been conducted to evaluate students' perceptions on and attitudes toward the use of electronic dictionaries in educational contexts. In general, the findings of the majority of studies show that students adopt positive attitudes toward the use of electronic dictionaries and find them beneficial and facilitative for their learning (Dashtestani, 2013). One of the reasons for preferring electronic dictionaries may be the average look-up time. Weschler (2000), in his experimental study, came to the conclusion that the average look-up time for ten words using a paper dictionary was 168 seconds (about 17 seconds per word), whereas using an electronic dictionary it was 130 seconds (about 13 seconds per word). In short, the students could look up words about 23% faster with an electronic dictionary.

Another common finding of research on dictionaries indicates that L2 learners do not know how to use dictionaries effectively and that most learners have not received any training about dictionary skills. Ali (2012) for example, indicates that recent studies focus on dictionary use training and argues that in all these studies the majority of the students indicate that they never received dictionary use training. In his study, for example, nearly 70% of the students stated that they can not use dictionaries effectively and another 54% stated that they needed training in using dictionaries. Chan (2005), who investigated the general use of dictionaries in English majors of universities in Hong Kong, also argues that students' dictionary skills were often not adequate enough for them to cope with their learning demand.

Tseng (2009), commenting on research about dictionaries that examined students' use of paper dictionaries by analyzing their look-up errors, clearly state that learners don't know how to use dictionaries effectively. The students had difficulty in selecting an appropriate meaning in a polysemous entry or they might select meanings from a wrong word entry due to their misidentification of the grammatical class of the looked-up word. These look-up error analysis studies may reveal students' lack of training in using dictionaries or be suggestive of their insufficient knowledge of the English language. Based on the errors students make and the difficulties they

encounter in consulting dictionaries, teachers can provide proper instruction to students in the use of dictionaries. Therefore, the training of dictionary skills is considered important and necessary because EFL learners may not be able to make good use of dictionaries without explicit instruction.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Participants

A total of 157 university prep school EFL students voluntarily participated in this study. They were enrolled on different faculties, schools and vocational high schools of Mehmet Akif Ersoy University in 2013/14, and they were all enrolled on the school of Foreign Languages at MAKÜ for an intensive one year EFL prep class. Of the 157 participants; 90 were females (57%) and 67 were male (43%); they ranged in age from 18 to 24, with a median age of 19,48 (157 participants, that is 85% were in the age range of 18-20); 87 were enrolled on day-time-education 56,5%) and 70 were enrolled on night-time-education (44,5%). The participants all voluntarily selected the school of Foreign Languages, meaning that their language awareness and motivation is high.

#### 3.2. Instrument

The questionnaire used in this study was adopted from Dashtestani (2013) and Hasan (2013). The questionnaire was translated into Turkish and 7 items were modified after the piloting in order to avoid confusion and to better suit the Turkish context. The questionnaire contains 4 sections composed of prescriptive set of statements in each section to which respondents mark their degree of agreement. The first section (3 items) asked the respondents about their background in dictionary usage; the second section (10 items) about kind of dictionary owned; the third section (8 items) about kind of dictionary used and usage frequency; the fourth section (12 items) about respondents thoughts about kinds of dictionaries.

#### 3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were obtained by distributing the questionnaire to 184 students towards the end of the 2013/14 academic year. However, only 157 questionnaires were eligible to be used in the study. EFL lecturers distributed the questionnaires during class time. After summarizing and tabulating the information obtained from the questionnaire, descriptive statistics were computed for the questionnaire items.

### 4. Results

The results will be presented in 4 Tables (as percentages and significance values) in accordance with the four sections outlined in the instrument section. Due to restrictions of space and page limits, only the most striking results will be interpreted, and the remaining will be left for the readers to interpret.

#### 4.1. Background in dictionary usage

Table 1. Background in dictionary usage.

Statements	Agree		Disagree		Undecided	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. I have received training about how to use a dictionary	16	10,19%	132	84,08%	9	5,73%
2. I can use a dictionary effectively	81	51,59%	12	7,64%	64	40,76%
3. Someone learning English definitely needs a dictionary	147	93,63%	2	1,27%	8	5,10%

As illustrated in Table 1, only 16 respondents (10%) stated that they received training about how to use dictionaries. This finding strengthens and parallels research findings as discussed earlier. 81 respondents (51%) stated that they can use dictionaries effectively; however the rest (49%) either disagreed or were undecided. This

finding also strengthens previous arguments that EFL learners should explicitly be instructed about using dictionaries. Finally, it is possible to argue that almost all the respondents (%94) agreed to the necessity of dictionaries in EFL contexts.

#### 4.2. Kind of dictionary owned

Table 2. Kind of dictionary owned<sup>†</sup>.

Statements	Yes/E-E/Online		No/E-T-T-E/Downloaded Program/C D-ROM		Both/Downloaded Program	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. I have a paper dictionary (PD)	152	96,82%	5	3,18%	NA	NA%
2. My PD is	9	5,73%	101	34,33%	42	26,75%
3. I have a pocket electronic dictionary (PED)	44	28,03%	113	71,97%	NA	NA%
4. My PED is	0	0%	27	17,20%	17	10,83
5. I use my cell phone (CP) as dictionary	143	92,20%	14	7,8%	NA	NA%
6. The dictionary in my CP is	2	1,27%	74	47,13%	68	43,31%
7. The dictionary in my CP	42	26,75%	60	38,22%	38	24,20%
8. I use my PC/laptop as dictionary	91	57,96%	66	42,04%	NA	NA%
9. The dictionary in my PC/laptop is	2	1,27%	31	19,75%	59	37,58%
10. The dictionary in my PC/laptop	72	45,85%	7	4,45%	14	8,91%

Table 2 reveals that PDs are the mostly owned (96,82%) dictionary kind, and that 34,33% of the respondents choose to use English-Turkish/Turkish-English (bilingual) PDs as opposed to the 5,73% who choose to use English-English (monolingual) PDs, another 26,75% choose to use both monolingual and bilingual PDs. Having CPs as dictionaries is the learners' second choice (92,20%); 47,13% use CPs as bilingual dictionaries; only 1,27% as monolingual; and 43,31% as both monolingual and bilingual. 26,75% use their CPs online, 38,22% have downloaded a dictionary program, and 24,20% use both online and dictionary programs. Having PCs/laptops is the learners' third choice (57, 96%); 19,75% use PCs/laptops as bilingual dictionaries; only 1,27% as monolingual; and 37,58% as both monolingual and bilingual. 45,85% use their PCs/laptops online, 4,45% use CD-ROMs and 8,91% have downloaded a dictionary program. PEDs are the least owned (28%) dictionary kind.

#### 4.3 Kind of dictionary used and frequency

Table 3. Kind of dictionary used and frequency<sup>‡</sup>.

Statements	Yes/More than once a day		No/Once a day		4-6 times a week		1-3 times a week	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. I use my paper dictionary (PD)	133	84,71%	24	15,29%	NA		NA	
2. I use my (PD)	34	21,66%	10	6,37%	31	19,75%	58	36,94%
3. I use my PED	44	28,03%	113	71,97%	NA		NA	
4. I use my PED	21	13,38%	8	5,10%	9	5,73%	6	3,82%
5. I use my CP as dictionary	143	92,20%	14	7,8%	NA		NA	
6. I use my CP as dictionary	93	59,24%	19	12,10%	21	13,38%	8	5,10%
7. I use my PC/laptop as dictionary	91	57,96%	66	42,04%	NA		NA	
8. I use my PC/laptop as dictionary	31	19,75%	17	10,83%	25	15,92%	19	12,10%

<sup>†</sup> For questions 1,3,5,8: Yes/No

For questions 2,4,6,9: E-E (english-english)/English-Turkish-Turkish-English (E-T-T-E)/both

For question 7: online/downloaded program/both

For question 10: online/CD-ROM/downloaded program

<sup>‡</sup> For questions 1/3/5/7: Yes/No

For questions 2/4/6/8/10: More than once a day/Once a day/4-6 times a week/1-3 times a week

Table 3 reveals that using CPs as dictionaries is the learners' first choice (92,20%), and 59,24% use their CPs as dictionaries more than once a day and 5,10%, 1-3 times a week. Thus, we may argue that CPs are the most frequently used kind of dictionaries. Using PDs is the learners' second choice (84,71%), 21,66% use their PDs more than once a day and 36,94%, 1-3 times a week. Using PCs/laptops as dictionaries is the learners' third choice (57,96%), and 19,75% use their PCs/laptops as dictionaries more than once a day and 12,10%, 1-3 times a week. PEDs are the least used (28%) dictionary kind.

#### 4.4. Thoughts about kinds of dictionaries

Table 4. Thoughts about kinds of dictionaries

Statements	Agree		Disagree		Undecided	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. PDs are difficult to carry	109	69,43%	22	14,01%	26	16,56%
2. PDs are expensive	59	37,58%	55	35,03%	43	27,39%
3. Using PDs is time consuming	90	57,32%	34	21,66%	33	21,02%
4. PDs are difficult to use	52	33,12%	65	41,40%	40	25,48%
5. CPs are difficult to carry as dictionaries	4	2,55%	150	95,54%	3	1,91%
6. CPs are expensive to use as dictionaries	0	0%	146	92,99%	11	7,01%
7. CPs are time consuming to use as dictionaries	2	1,27%	151	96,18%	4	2,55%
8. CPs are difficult to use as dictionaries	3	1,91%	146	92,99%	8	5,10%
9. PCs/Laptops are difficult to carry as dictionaries	123	78,34%	19	12,10%	15	9,55%
10. PCs/Laptops are expensive to use as dictionaries	30	19,11%	101	64,33%	26	16,56%
11. PCs/Laptops are time consuming to use as dictionaries	34	21,66%	89	56,69%	34	21,66%
12. PCs/Laptops are difficult to use as dictionaries	33	21,02%	94	59,87%	30	19,11%

As we can see in Table 4, 69,43% of the respondents think that PDs are difficult to carry, 37,58% think that they are expensive, 57,32% think that they are time consuming and 33,12% think that they are difficult to use. Thus, evaluated altogether, we may argue that the respondents think PDs are not practical to carry and to use. In fact PDs are seen as the least practical of all. On the contrary, only 2,55% of the respondents think that CPs are difficult to carry as dictionaries, none of the respondents think that CPs are expensive to use as dictionaries, only 1,27% think that they are time consuming and only 1,91% think that they are difficult to use. Therefore, we may argue that the respondents think that using CPs as dictionaries is the most practical of all. Finally, 78,34% of the respondents think that PCs/laptops are difficult to carry as dictionaries, 19,11% think that PCs/laptops are expensive to use as dictionaries, 21,66% think that they are time consuming and only 21,02% think that they are difficult to use.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of the present study was to explore university prep-school EFL learners' dictionary ownership and preferences in the Turkish context, to discuss them under the light of the current literature and to fill a gap in locally situated research. The questionnaire used in this study, adopted from Dashtestani (2013) and Hasan (2013), was translated into Turkish and 7 items were modified after the piloting in order to avoid confusion and to better suit the Turkish context. The results reveal that university prep school EFL learners in Turkey have similar attitudes and thoughts about dictionaries as their counterparts elsewhere in the world. A great majority (94%) agrees that dictionaries are inevitable devices for EFL learners, but almost half (48%) can not use dictionaries effectively and only 10% received dictionary use training. These findings, therefore, strengthen the earlier argument that most L2 learners are not skilled enough in using dictionaries to make the maximum use of dictionaries and that they need explicit instruction about using dictionaries (see Tseng, 2009 for practical instruction in dictionary use skills).

PDs were the mostly owned (96,82%) dictionary kind, 34,33% preferred bilingual PDs and 26,75% preferred both monolingual and bilingual PDs. CPs as dictionaries were the second most owned dictionary kind (92,20%),



47,13% preferred bilingual CPs and 43,31% preferred both monolingual and bilingual CPs. PCs/laptops were the third most owned dictionary kind (57,96%), 19,75% preferred bilingual PCs/laptops and 37,58% preferred both monolingual and bilingual PCs/laptops. PEDs were the least owned (28,03%) dictionary kind. Regardless of the kind of dictionary owned, bilingual dictionaries were the most popular. Using the electronic dictionaries online was the most favored method, downloading a program was the second and using CD-ROMs was the third.

Surprisingly, when it was a matter of using the dictionary and the frequency of usage, CPs took the first place (92,20% usage) and 59,24% more than once a day frequency. PDs were the second (84, 71% usage) but only 21,66% more than once a day frequency. PCs/laptops were the third (57,96% usage) but only 19,75% more than once a day frequency. As a result, bilingual CPs are the mostly preferred and used kind of dictionary. The preference of bilingual and electronic dictionaries by the EFL learners in the present study also parallel previous research findings as discussed earlier in the literature review. Given the growing popularity of online electronic dictionaries among EFL learners, studies on learners' use of online dictionaries are highly recommended because they will have great pedagogical value on English teaching and learning in EFL contexts.

PDs were regarded as the least practical due to difficulty in carrying, being expensive, being difficult to use and being time consuming. PCs/laptops were the second least practical mainly due to difficulties in carrying. CPs on the other hand were the most practical of all mainly because they were easy to carry, cheap to use, not time consuming and easy to use. These factors in a way explain the growing popularity of using CPs as dictionaries in Turkish EFL contexts. However, CPs in the class may be a total distraction both for the students and the teachers if not handled properly. Therefore, effective management methods must be developed if CPs are to enter into the EFL contexts. This is only possible by further research. Thus, this study concludes with an invitation for more research in investigating how learners use dictionaries, especially electronic dictionaries.

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